

19: Albert Bierstadt *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California* (1865)

Diane P. Fischer

Featuring a pristine valley near Lake Tahoe backed by the resplendent Sierra Nevada Mountains, *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California* is a classic example of Albert Bierstadt's landscapes of the mid-1860s.¹ By the time this work was created, Bierstadt was establishing himself as the foremost painter of the American West, most notably with his majestic *The Rocky Mountains* of 1863 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art).² Although others had depicted western scenery before him, the German-born Bierstadt, who was raised in New Bedford, Massachusetts, was the first artist with both the philosophical underpinnings of the American Hudson River School painters and impeccable European training.³

Like many Americans of his generation, Bierstadt had studied painting in the art center of Düsseldorf, Germany. During extensive sketching trips through the mountains of Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, the young artist mastered painting Alpine scenery in the manner of his European mentors. In the fall of 1857, after four years abroad, Bierstadt returned to New Bedford. Finding the eastern mountains of the United States uninspiring, the ambitious and adventurous artist looked westward to the relatively undocumented territory around the Rocky Mountains. In the spring of 1859, the artist-explorer embarked upon the most pivotal trip of his career: Bierstadt accompanied Frederick W. Lander's federally sponsored Survey to the Rockies, placing him on the cutting edge of western exploration. Bierstadt was delighted by the majesty of the Rocky Mountains, which he compared to the Bernese Alps.⁴ Soon after returning east that September, Bierstadt moved to the fashionable Tenth Street Studio Building in New York. Applying the methods he had learned abroad, Bierstadt based his growing reputation upon his initial impressions of the West, which he rendered Edenic. He referred to sketches, photographs, and Native American artifacts amassed on the trip, which provided unique and exciting source material.

Bierstadt's *Sierras* is a prime example of a studio production for which the artist consulted on-the-spot sketches. While Bierstadt had made the preparatory sketches for the painting during his second trip to the West in 1863, the work itself was not completed until two years later in his New York studio. The 15 x 21-inch format of the painting places it somewhere between the pencil drawings Bierstadt made in pocket-sized notebooks he carried in the field and his "Great Pictures," which typically measured about ten feet in width. Some critics consider these smaller oils to be among his finest accomplishments.⁵ The smaller format enabled him to retain the freshness of the *plein air* sketches, but also gave him room to add the embellishments that made his work so popular. In *The Sierras*, Bierstadt was able to blend the "facts" of his real-life experience with the "fiction" of his studio work.

Although some aspects of the painting deviate from the truth, the inspiration for it was rooted in reality. In May of 1863, Bierstadt, accompanied by the writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow, traveled to California via the Overland Stage, and then continued up the Pacific coast. *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California* recalls a specific moment during the expedition, just after they had entered California along the south side of Lake Tahoe. Indeed, the mountains in the painting resemble the east side of the Sierra looking west, which coincides with their route.⁶ Quite possibly, this painting was inspired by the scenery near Trout Creek of the Upper Truckee River in Lake Valley, just west of the pioneer town of Meyers.⁷ As was his custom, Bierstadt used detail to enhance believability. For example, the foliage includes red Indian paintbrush, white grass of

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Gould Fund, 92.78





Parnassus or hyacinth, yellow monkey flower, goldenrod, and waterleaf at the edge of the stream—all indigenous to the area.⁸ The cottonwood trees in the middle distance and the volcanic rock in the foreground are also characteristic of the region.

However, despite these particulars, *The Sierras* is not merely—or even really—a record of what Bierstadt and Ludlow witnessed, and can be interpreted on many levels. In one way, the painting is a celebration of survival. Recounting their experiences in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Ludlow described their trip in early July after leaving Salt Lake City as “the most frightful nightmare of my existence.”⁹ In inferior and often crowded coaches, they trudged “through the most horrible desert conceivable by the mind of man,” witnessed death and other atrocities, and lived in abject fear of being ambushed by the Goshoot tribe until they reached Washoe [Carson City, Nevada].¹⁰ Only their entry into California absolved them of this ghastly five hundred-mile trip through hell. According to Ludlow,

*By the mere act of crossing that ridge [the Sierra] and stepping over the California line, we came into glorious forests of ever-living green, a rainbow affluence of flowers, an air like a draught from windows left open in heaven.... Here, virtually at the end of our overland journey, since our feet pressed the green borders of the Golden state, we sat down to rest, feeling that one short hour, one little league, had translated us out of the infernal world into heaven.*¹¹

Ludlow's language, equating the scene with heaven, was not offhand, but rather conveyed the tenor of the times.

Indeed, Ludlow's glowing remarks resound in Bierstadt's interpretation of their initial glimpse of California. Reflecting the style he had learned as a student in Düsseldorf, Bierstadt carefully orchestrated the color and composition in *The Sierras* to create a romantic, ideal conception of California as the new “Promised Land.” He combined various scenes, exaggerated the mountains' cragginess, and rendered the clouds and lighting in an operatic manner. He also employed perspective to enhance the painting's symbolic meaning. With the horizon at eye-level, the viewer has the simulated experience of walking into the Promised Land of California alongside the explorers.¹² Thus, like many of Bierstadt's other works, this immaculate landscape represents a “primal vision,” a landscape depicted as if it were seen for the first time by human eyes.¹³

By presenting the scene as a primal vision, Bierstadt ignores the presence of the Native Americans who had lived in the area for millennia, and who are not invited to share the paradisiacal experience. Bierstadt's attitude reflects the prevailing notion of Manifest Destiny, which maintained that certain people of European ancestry had the God-given right to inherit the North American continent.¹⁴

Bierstadt thus depicted the scene in *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California* in a way that reassured many European-Americans that westward expansion was justified.

Bierstadt's primal vision paintings also offered viewers a temporary escape from other problems, notably the Civil War then raging back east during Bierstadt's California trip of 1863 and still a factor when he completed *The Sierras* in New York two years later.¹⁵ At this time, the ravaged land of the eastern United States could no longer symbolize America as the New

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Eden.¹⁶ However, California, which was not directly tainted by the war, represented not only a haven for escape, but also a source for the future. For a brief moment in history, Bierstadt was highly successful in perpetuating the myth of America as the new Promised Land.

In fact, before the West became truly known through photographs, Bierstadt was regarded as a reporter.¹⁷ Then, with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, tourists and photographers had relatively easy access to what had recently been a remote region. Increasingly, Bierstadt's painted travelogues were no longer believable. This major development in transportation also coincided with a shift of taste in American art. While a number of American artists were converting to the more relaxed, intimate, and naturalistic approach of modern French painting during the 1870s, Bierstadt clung to the romantic notion of using art to transcend reality.¹⁸ With these transformations, the once-revered artist was deemed old-fashioned, and eventually suffered financial ruin.¹⁹

It was not until the 1960s, corresponding with the rise in appreciation for American art, that Bierstadt's reputation began to revive.²⁰ Today, scholars regard Bierstadt as one of the major American artists of the nineteenth century, and his work is widely admired by museum visitors. Although the symbolic content in paintings such as *The Sierras* is inherent in the work itself, its meaning has, in effect, shifted through time. Present audiences are no longer preoccupied with geological or archaeological correctness, or with political issues such as westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, or the Civil War. And, although society now abhors our nation's prior treatment of Native Americans, today's viewers can appreciate *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California* and Bierstadt's other paintings for their technical brilliance, for their evocation of a pristine wilderness now known to be fragile, as well as for their ability to transport us into a magical realm, similar to our own, but without imperfections.

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